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ABSTRACT

A sample of preservice teacher education students (N=23) enrolled in their second set of core courses was presented with a scenario to learn their willingness to begin teaching immediately. The scenario, which asked them to respond by either accepting or rejecting a job offer in an urban public school setting, was presented on the second day of the class and again near the end of the semester. Students were also asked to justify in writing their perceptions of the skills and knowledge they possessed or lacked that caused them to respond in the manner they did. Of the 23 subjects, 6 initially accepted the offer and 17 rejected it. The most-cited reason for acceptance was that their previous experiences working with children had already provided them with the necessary skills to take on the task of teaching. The most-cited reason for rejection was the students' perceptions of their need for more formal education training. After the course, 15 students would refuse the job offer. Students at the end of the semester indicated needs for additional formal classwork, more classroom experience, and mentoring. appendixes provide two data tables and the scenario used for both initial and final responses. (Contains 28 references.) (JLS)

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When Will I Be Ready? Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Job Readiness: A Qualitative Study

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Presented at the Eastern Educational Research Association

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When Will I Be Ready? Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Job Readiness: A Qualitative Study

Introduction

In the past thirty years, undergraduate preservice teacher education programs have regularly come under fire from some formidable opponents. The broadsides have included attacks on both the quality of programs and of the students admitted to them (Kerr, 1983; Koerner, 1963; Kramer, 1991; Weaver, 1983). Calls for fifth-year programs have increased and received national attention (Carnegie Task Force, 1986; Holmes Group, 1986). Other calls have touted the benefits of alternative certifications as a panacea for the ills of the teaching profession, enabling the best and brightest to forego the wretched drudgery of undergraduate teacher education programs that critics perceive as an obstacle to improving the teaching force (Feistritzer, 1993; Knauth, 1994; Kramer, 1991; Littleton & Holcomb, 1994; Sindelar & Mark, 1993; Stafford & Barrow, 1994; Stevens & Dial, 1993).

While many critics of undergraduate teacher preparation programs have idiosyncratic agendas that influence their views, much of the ammunition that they have at hand has been supplied by commentators on research into preservice teacher education itself (Conant, 1963, Phillips, 1985). Gage (1991) commented on the "obviousness," which these critics decried, of much of what has been studied in deriving the principles upon which preservice education courses are often built. He stated: "One noteworthy characteristic of all of these criticisms is that they were what might be called nonempirical or, at least, not systematically and formally empirical" (p. 12). This lack of empiricism, he contended, often leads to people accepting, as a truism, a principle which is not borne out by later empirical study.

One truism that is widely accepted is that preservice teachers candidates already believe that they can do the job of teaching. Numerous researchers have indicated that this condition exists (Barnes, 1989; Book, Byers, & Freeman, 1983; Lortie, 1975; Zeichner & Grant, 1981). In addressing that state of affairs, however, Lanier and Little (1985) noted that much of this type of research tended to be retrospective in nature and that "most conclusions are based on teachers' assessments of the initial preparation and

its general capacity to support them in the full range of their current responsibilities" (p. 542). Other studies merely looked at teachers in their student teaching phase of their program (Galuzzo & Minix, 1992; Marchant, 1993; Silvernail & Costello, 1983).

If the previous contention were true, then efforts to socialize preservice teachers into the complexity of thought exhibited by experienced teachers would not be a problem for students and teacher educators alike. Addressing this situation, Barnes (1989) contended that preservice teacher educators needed to be aware of student conceptions of teaching as telling and to replace their simplistic notions with grounded understandings. Though no ideal manner of achieving these goals has been forthcoming, one feature of successful programs has been activities designed to force prospective teachers to confront and question their beliefs and assumptions. One effort espoused the use of writing for students to reflect on field experiences in exploring the "shattered images" of teaching that these experiences can create (Cole & Knowles, 1993). In one of the relatively few studies of students' conceptions of teaching while enrolled in an introductory teacher education course, Feiman-Nemser, McDiarmid, Melanick and Parker (1989) advanced the argument that preservice teacher education students need to "develop an appreciation of teaching as an uncertain, contextually dependent and intellectually demanding activity" (p. 1) at an early stage of their program.

Critics have called for dismantling undergraduate preservice education programs as an "obvious" step in improving the quality of our nation's teaching force. This appears to be based on the "truism" that the training of our teachers as undergraduates contributes to what is wrong with education; however, there is no systematically-collected data to support their contention. Under these circumstances, it is only prudent to bear in mind Gage's (1991) caveat toward accepting "informal and personal [appraisals] . . . not made with any great specificity, detail, explicitness, or exactitude" (p. 12). Therefore, the present study was undertaken in an effort to be more systematic in collecting data on students' perceptions of their preparedness for teaching and the effects of their formal training while enrolled in an early phase of an undergraduate presrvice teacher education program.

Methodology

Sample and Procedure

In the Fall Semester of 1994, preservice teacher education students (N=23) at a large, urban campus were enrolled in their second set of core course offerings in a recently redesigned, developmentally-sequenced program in undergraduate preservice teacher training. These two blocked courses were entitled Instructional Design and Instructional Resources. Though taught by different instructors, the courses were planned and delivered so as to complement each other.

The subjects were heterogeneously-mixed and ranged in class rank from sophomores to post-baccalaureates seeking certification. They were presented with a scenario on the second day of class which asked them to respond by either accepting or rejecting a job offer in an urban public school setting (see Appendix B). The scene described their job responsibilities as a full-time teaching load at starting teacher pay. It was understood that they were in an early portion of their preservice training program, but the principal and district were willing to overlook this because of a need for a teacher in the preservice student's field. In addition to a Yes-No response, students were asked to justify in writing their perceptions of the skills and knowledge that they possessed or lacked which caused them to respond in the manner in which they did. Near the end of the semester, the subjects were presented with the same scenario and asked to respond to it again.

Data Analysis

A qualitative approach was taken to analyze data produced by students in the form of personal documents. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) noted that the advantage of generating this type of qualitative data was that the researcher can direct the authors' focus to attend to a single event. The two documents produced by each student were collected and analyzed in order to answer the following general questions:

1. Why did students accept or reject the job offer at the beginning of semester? at the end?

2. Did training in and practice applying principles of instructional design and instructional resources affect students' decisions about accepting or rejecting the offer?
3. What do students perceive to be their needs in improving their job readiness at the end of the courses?

The researcher adapted Kvale's (1983) steps in phenomenological research in a three-step procedure: 1) allowing students to openly describe their responses, 2) investigating the "essence" of those responses, and 3) phenomonologically reducing the emerging phenomena into a set of coded data. At the initial analysis stage, each student's two documents were read in an effort to gain a "feel" for the data. On a second reading, initial responses were divided into "Yes" and "No" categories, and all references to individual skills, personality traits, background knowledge and life experiences that students cited as impacting their decisions were recorded. The same procedure was then followed for final responses. The two lists, Accepting the Job Offer and Rejecting the Job Offer, were further reduced into six common themes for each on a third reading. After this final reduction, the documents were then organized according to the subheadings below, which were implied by the general questions, and the final analyses were undertaken.

Results

Initial Responses - Accepting the Job Offer

Of the 23 subjects enrolled in the course, 6 initially accepted the job offer. The most-cited reason was that their previous, related experiences working with children had provided them with the skills necessary to take on the task of teaching (see Table A-1 for a complete frequency count). Four of the six who responded affirmatively made this claim. These experiences ranged from one subject with ten years experience as an aide in special needs classes to one subject who had had no prior experience with children in a school setting but felt that his major of physical education and own athletic prowess would enable him to successfully teach.

The second most-cited reasons, mentioned in two responses each, were personality traits or skills and the growth anticipated through on-the-job experiences. In the former instances, the subjects expressed that individual personality traits or skills, enthusiasm on one response and mental strength on the other, would enable them to be successful in a classroom situation. In the one subject's case, enthusiasm was the only reason she mentioned; she recognized that she "may not know everything I should, but I would create a [sic] environment for the student to be excited about learning." She further contended that she "could help the students more by just be [sic] excited and teach with more creative ideas." For those who wanted on-the-job experience to be their teachers, one of the subjects stated that he believed "the best way to learn is by trying something and learning from your mistakes. Sure, I might not be the 'best' teacher right away, but as I learn I eventually will be the 'best' teacher."

The other reasons, cited once apiece, were the match between the discipline and the job offer and the sufficiency of the subject's formal training. The former reason was given by the physical education teacher, while the latter was given by a senior whose parents are both teachers with whom she had worked in classrooms.

Initial Responses - Rejecting the Job Offer

Initially, 17 of the subjects rejected the offer. The reasons cited for rejecting the offer fell into six general categories (see Table A-2). The most-cited reason (n=12) was the students' perceptions of their need for more formal education training. This was followed closely in frequency by a concern for students' welfare (n=9) and the complexity of the teaching act (n=8). The relationship between the students' being offered the job at this early stage in their program and the complexity of the teaching act was summed up by one student in her response as being "like putting a fifteen-year-old with minimal driving experience in charge of driving a busload of people across the country."

Only five responses indicated a need for more content area knowledge. Three of those five were secondary students, representing the foreign language and mathematics disciplines. Five responses also indicated a need for more actual classroom experience and/or mentoring by an experienced teacher. The final reason, offered in two responses,

was a concern for being accepted by others as a professional. One of these respondents was a nineteen-year-old sophomore who indicated this was her only concern that caused her to reject the offer.

Final Responses - Accepting the Job Offer

As the researcher anticipated, there was an increase in the number of subjects accepting the offer at the end of the semester. Four subjects who had originally rejected the offer later accepted. Their reasons, however, showed significant changes in frequency and order (see Table A-1). While previous, related experiences (n=6) still was most often cited, six respondents felt that they had now had sufficient formal training to take on the demands of daily teaching. Five others felt that they were now prepared to put their theoretical understandings and simulated experiences into a practical situation by taking on a full teaching load.

One new reason was added in this post-class response. Though not indicated on the scenario, three of the respondents accepted the job with the expectation that they would receive support from others on-site or off. One subject assumed that because the district was "eager" to hire her that they would provide the support she needed. Another accepted the job with the caveat that "there would be a 'sane' way of incorporating full time work in conjunction with my remaining courses."

No respondents indicated that their personality traits or skills would enable them to take on the job. Of the two respondents who had cited this in their initial reasons, one rejected the offer and the other was more hesitant. Though the latter still accepted the offer, she emphasized her additional training and extensive experience teaching children in Sunday school and camp situations.

Final Responses - Rejecting the Job Offer

Of the seventeen who had orignally refused the offer, thirteen still would refuse after the course. Two who had initially accepted the offer also chose to reject it upon reconsideration. Though these students had now completed another full semester of education courses, the need for more formal training was still cited most often as the reason for rejecting the offer (see Table A-2). A dramatic increase was noted in

responses to the need for mentoring or more classroom experience (n=9). Little change was evident in the other reasons given.

The two who had initially accepted the offer both recognized a need for more formal training in education and an increased understanding of the complexity of the teaching act. One responded that she had "come to realize something very valuable, I'm not ready for this experience. . . . Even though I have had some experience in the classroom I feel that there is so much more that I need to learn before I begin to affect the lives of so many children." The other student was the one who had initially cited her enthusiasm as her reason for accepting the job. She now stated that she recognized that standing up in front of the class is not enough and that she needs more training to be proficient at the preparation aspects of teaching.

Effects of Instructional Design/Instructional Resources Class

Of the four students who accepted the offer after initially rejecting it, three of them cited their experiences in the Instructional Design/Instructional Resources course as being deciding factors. Also, three of the four who would still accept the job after initially doing so mentioned the course as being one of their deciding factors. Typical comments are exemplified by the following:

> I have taken several classes this semester that have boosted my confidence and ability. I feel that I would be able to present lessons and prepare students for their futures. . . . I have created several lessons and a summative measure for a unit.
>
> I am enrolled in a Phase II course at the University and it is because of my experience in this course that I feel that I am experienced enough to accept this job. This course has given me the confidence in myself to tackle a teaching position.

These excerpts indicate the increased confidence that some students felt by virtue of their experiences designing units and lessons in a clinical environment. While these excerpts also may indicate a certain amount of naivete about all the responsibilities of day-to-day teaching, these students expressed their satisfaction with the lessons learned within the courses.

Not only did students mention the courses in terms that indicated their efficacy in preparing the preservice teachers for their ultimate career positions, but they also mentioned these courses as problematizing the field of education for them. In many

cases, the preservice teachers realized how much they had yet to learn, ostensibly because of their Phase II experiences:

> Although I feel I am a little more prepared to take on a classroom now than I was at the beginning of this semester, I still do not believe I am ready to take on such a huge responsibility. I feel more competent in writing objectives, making up tests, etc., but I still feel I have a lot to learn. I have not even taken any methods courses or classroom management.

> The reason that I'm not ready is that from taking this class I still have a lot to learn. . . . A big part of the reason why I feel this way is because of my classroom management class. I realize that I still have much to learn about disciplining students.

While some recognized their need for more formal class work, others recognized the lack of a correlation between the simulated experiences within the college class and the reality of the classroom. In some cases, this was reflected in a concern for how lessons taught in a micro-teaching experience would translate to actual students:

> After careful consideration, I am close to being ready to teach. I still feel, however, that I need a little bit of actual practice. Not in class, but with real students. The ultimate goal is to teach them and not to "pretend teach" my peers.

Others came to recognize the need to integrate all the skills they were learning in both content areas and education courses to be effective teachers.

> I need further education in both my math and physics areas of study. I [now] know what makes good tests, objectives and teaching strategies, but I don't know how to put them all together properly. Only student teaching and further education courses will give me the confidence I need to make a good teacher.

Job Readiness - What Students Still Need

Students perceived two needs at the end of the semester that would make them feel better prepared for the job market. Sixty percent of students (9 of 15) who believed they were not yet ready for a job wrote that they needed more formal education courses. Of those courses, the only ones mentioned by name were classroom management, methods courses, and multi-cultural education. The nine responses were down from twelve at the beginning of the semester and appeared to indicate that a number of students were now satisfied with their formal education training. This conclusion also may be borne out by the number of students (5, up from 2) who felt that they will benefit most from on-the-job experience more than from more formal training.

A more dramatic need, though, is indicated by the increase from five responses to nine of the number of students who felt that they needed more classroom experience

and/or mentoring from a veteran teacher. Even from those who accepted the job, there was an increase in the number of expectations of support. The need for support and mentoring was noted by both those who accepted the offer:

> I would rely partially on what I have learned in classes, some from my professors and some from the other people I know who are teachers. . . . I believe you should have much more on-site training and field experiences than what there is [sic].

and those who did not:

> I especially don't want to take on a job until after I've completed my student teaching. Teaching a class of my own is somewhat frightening right now. I am apprehensive but looking forward to my student teaching experience to calm my fears, give me greater insight and boost my self-confidence.

Conclusions

Critics have been vocal in the denigration of both undergraduate preservice teacher candidates and the programs that are preparing them. While the sample in the present study is too small and the methodology inappropriate to generalize, the results do suggest that some of the opinions regarding undergraduate preservice teachers that have been expressed by opponents of these programs may need greater study. The 27% of students who initially accepted the job does not seem to indicate that preservice teachers already feel they can teach. Of those 27%, some appeared to be making this claim under naive assumptions that personality is enough to successfully teach or because of the perceived lack of preparation needed for a particular discipline, i.e., physical eduation.

For many students there was a recognition from the outset of the complexity of the teaching act. For others, the rejection after initial acceptance of this job and the accompanying response indicated their greater understanding of all that is involved in teacher-student encounters. The scenario assignment itself may have helped students confront some of their preconceptions about what it means to teach. Asked to describe the skills and talents they possessed that would make them successful, students were required to search a bit deeper than simply saying "yes" or "no" to a job offer.

Regardless of the final acceptance or rejection of the job offer, students recognized the value of their preservice education program. While nine of the fifteen who rejected the final offer cited a need for more formal training in education courses, six of the eight who

accepted felt that their formal training had been sufficient. Nine subjects also felt that the culminating act of their preservice program, student teaching, was an experience that they should complete before feeling fully prepared. This need for mentoring from a veteran teacher was identified by three of the eight who accepted, an indication that even students who felt prepared to take on the classroom recognized their need to be supported in their induction into full-time teaching responsibilities.

Educational Implications

Though these conclusions must remain somewhat tentative at this time, several implications reveal themselves within the data:

1. The data produced in this study suggested that students at this early stage in their programs perceive a need for the skills and knowledge offered in formal education courses to better prepare them for a job. Before accepting the claims of critics of undergraduate teacher education that preservice teachers do not need all the course offerings that are currently required, more systematic study should be undertaken.
2. The data also suggests that there are gaps between students' perceptions of what they bring to the teaching act and their needs as student or beginning teachers. Students feel a need for mentoring and support from experienced teachers, and this should be incorporated in the design of undergraduate preservice education programs.
3. As an authentic assessment technique, the scenario was simple and easy to use in extracting rich, contextually-dependent data from the subjects. The use of scenarios may help preservice teachers problematize the teaching profession and lead to a greater recognition of the complexity of the teaching-learning act. The use of scenarios also responds to the need for more reflective assignments in preservice programs.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Frequency of Responses for Teacher Candidates Who Accepted the Job Offer

Response	Initial Offer[a]	Final Offer[b]
Anticipated support from school personnel	0	3
Previous, related experience with children	4	6
Sufficient formal training through education program	1	6
Job offer/discipline match	1	2
Benefits gained from on-job experience	2	5
Personal traits/skills	2	0

[a]Maximum number for any single repsonse was 6. [b]Maximum number for any single repsonse was 8.

Table 2

Frequency of Responses for Teacher Candidates Who Rejected the Job Offer

Response	Initial Offer[a]	Final Offer[b]
Need for increased content knowledge	5	4
Need for increased training in education	12	9
Recognition of complexity of teaching act	8	8
Concern for students' welfare	9	8
Need for mentoring/classroom experience	5	9
Concern for acceptance by parents/teachers	2	1

[a]Maximum number for any single repsonse was 17. [b]Maximum number for any single repsonse was 15.

Appendix B

Scenario Used for Both Initial and Final Responses

You have just been offered a full-time teaching job by a large urban school district that is having difficulty finding certified teachers in your field/grade level. They are aware that you are enrolled at the University and are only now enrolled in a Phase II course. They are willing to accept that, but they insist that you must be prepared to take over a full-time teaching load and will be treated as any other contract professional.

Will you accept the job? If so, what leads you to believe that you are prepared for this experience? What personal background or training will you rely on to help you through? If not, what do you believe you need before you are prepared for an opportunity like this? In either case, explain your response as completely as possible.